

13 February 1980

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MEMORANDUM FOR: NIO for Warning

SUBJECT : A Follow-up Alert Memo on Vietnamese Incursions into Thailand?

1. I recommend that early consideration be given to issuing a second Alert Memo on this subject. It has been more than two months since the 6 December memo warned that a major Vietnamese offensive in western Kampuchea, reportedly planned for late December, could spread across the border "to such an extent that the Thai armed forces would be unable to cope." The memo predicted that the Thai would appeal for US assistance, possibly under the terms of the Manila Pact.

2. The published record since 6 December has tended to dilute this warning somewhat. The NID of 29 January canvassed possible explanations for the delay of the offensive. The main thrust of this article was that Hanoi, for a variety of reasons—external as well as the situation in Kampuchea itself—appears to have altered or abandoned its plans for a major offensive. This article concluded, however, with a reminder that Vietnam's option to "punish both the resistance and its external supporters remains open" and that Hanoi "may ultimately decide that its interests will be best served by a major offensive, including larger cross-border operations." The NID of 12 February reported [redacted] a Vietnamese contingency plan for operations up to ten kilometers inside Thailand, including multi-divisional attacks against major Thai positions.

3. Information during the past two weeks can be interpreted as evidence that the Vietnamese are engaged in final preparations for a major offensive within the next few weeks. [redacted]

The first phase of this mission (pre-strike reconnaissance) was to be completed by 17 February, and the second phase would feature "sneak sapper raids" from 18 to 27 February. OSR's Military Weekly Review of 13 February concluded that, "Current increased military activity in the border areas strengthens the likelihood of larger-scale operations in Thailand that we have seen to date." OSR also pointed out that "February would seem about the latest period for launching a major operation to curtail Thai support for anti-Vietnamese resistance forces in order for the Vietnamese to handle contingencies before the onset of the rainy season in May."

4. The Soviet dimension. Analysts have suggested that the delay of the Vietnamese December offensive may have been caused in part by Soviet pressure. The reasoning was that the Soviets feared that a Vietnamese thrust into Thailand which occurred roughly simultaneously with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan might provoke dangerous overreactions in the West and China. The question now is whether the Soviets in mid-February are still restrained by such inhibitions. A case could be made that Moscow has had ample time to assess foreign reaction to its move into Afghanistan, and that the Soviets have concluded that the pattern of US, West European, Chinese, and Japanese responses is clear and that further significant foreign reprisals are unlikely.

If this is in fact the Soviet judgment, they may calculate that implicit support for a sharp Vietnamese cross-border thrust designed to punish Thailand and compel it to halt its cooperation with China in resupplying Kampuchean resistance forces would convey a valuable signal to the US, its allies, and China.

5. China: The 6 December Alert Memo stated that "a major Thai defeat could constitute sufficient reason for China to teach Vietnam a second lesson; this, in turn, could invite a greater Soviet response." There are some signs of increased Chinese concern that a Vietnamese offensive may occur in the near future. If this is Beijing's view, we should reexamine China's possible options for deterring or punishing Hanoi.

6. The Carter Administration's public attention to the situation on the Thai-Kampuchean border also argues for a follow-up Alert Memo. The State Department issued a statement on 26 January expressing concern about reports of large Vietnamese troop deployments and possible attacks on refugee camps along the border. It specifically asserted that Vietnamese military activity poses a "potential threat to the security of Thailand" and warned that "any expansion would constitute a threat to the peace, security, and stability of the entire region." State called on both Vietnam and the Soviet Union "to refrain from any action which would threaten Thailand's security and integrity" and endanger the safety of the refugees. The Administration has thus served notice that it views Vietnamese and Soviet behavior as an important test, and Moscow and Hanoi will make their decisions in full knowledge of this position.

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